

# Regionalism in the Middle West

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DEFINITELY a product of our growing regional consciousness, yet not consciously a part of the regionalist movement, Ruth Suckow's *The Folks*\* raises a question of vital importance in American culture. It is a novel written to illustrate a theory, a theory that challenges certain assumptions which had become literary convention a few years ago. Very seldom does an author write a magazine article telling what ought to be done and then settle down quietly to devote four years to doing it. But to understand the significance of the very title of *The Folks* one must go back to an article by Ruth Suckow in *Scribner's* in 1930, where she protested against the superficial interpretation of America as standardized, lacking in variety, rootless. Her article was one of the manifestos of the year which marked the end of the twenties in a more than chronological sense:

I do not see how it would be possible for any one to travel across country by automobile . . . and arrive at either coast with a remembrance made up wholly of noise, dirt, mechanical industry, and ugly provincialism. His memory of towns must be interspersed with that of farm lands teeming with abundance, crops of every description, deserts inhabited only by burrowing animals and fantastic cacti, great rivers, mountains, chasms, and forests. He must travel with the blinders of prejudice and

\* *THE FOLKS* by Ruth Suckow (FARRAR & RINEHART. 727 pp. \$3.00).

preconception if he perceives only what is alike, and not what is different. He has driven through the brick-built, pre-revolutionary village of McVeytown, Penn., and through brand-new Tulsa, Oklahoma. He has caught varied glimpses of the spirit of the country in the settled prosperity of the plain frame houses of the Middle West and the delicate and forlorn distinction of white Southern houses in a pleasantly dilapidated landscape; in the new settlements of tourist cabins that shelter a huge nomad population; and those deserted mining towns where pack-rats scamper over decaying floors in shacks with broken windows. At the end of such a journey, the much-talked-of standardization of gasoline-stations and chain stores seems nothing but a hasty superstructure erected of necessity . . . to bridge the mighty gaps of an overwhelming variety.

But it is all American—no one can doubt that. Something deeply homogeneous binds together the extravagant differences. It comes out in the catchwords and slogans; . . . in the confidently friendly approach of strangers met by chance at the same table in a coffee-shop; in the final question of the waitress in the Western restaurant: "Have you folks had all you want?" Generous, easy-going, well-met, obtuse, and naïve, friendly first and suspicious only later—it is quite unlike the hard, integrated peasant simplicity of the folk of Europe. It is the "folks" spirit.

Thus she called upon the intelligentsia "to cease chasing 'folk art' and to understand the real basis of American civilization — the folks". "The whole matter may be summed up in this: the folk idea in America has become the idea of 'folks'." In the similarity and difference between the two words she finds the similarity and difference between the basis of European culture and what should be the basis of American cul-

ture. We do not have the customs of a peasant folk, but we have the equally colourful customs of the family, "the folks".

The Christmas-tree, lighted with candles and festooned with popcorn, with its tip touching the ceiling, held presents for everybody, later distributed by the most restless class of boys and the prettiest class of girls. . . . The schoolroom . . . decorated for the Thanksgiving programme with corn-stalks, pumpkins, autumn leaves, and pictures of turkey gobblers drawn in colored chalks on the blackboards. . . . The lore and legend so prized by the best Americans when it gilds the lives of the heroes of ancient foreign lands tried to make a beginning in the tale of George Washington's cherry-tree and Lincoln's funny stories. . . . No one could claim that the high schools were not likely centres of communal amusements. . . .

Yet this is the very period when serious division began. The rebellious children of this era grew up to be more rebellious still, until most of them broke away from the folks life altogether. When they searched for a folk art, they went elsewhere. People who would travel any distance to see the Spanish church processions in New Mexico, for example, are not apt to recognize the old Christmas Eve programme as in any way related to a church festival. . . . Today we have the spectacle of a whole tribe of aesthetic nomads, a flock of cuckoo birds, always trying to make their homes in nests that other birds have builded. Many have gone clear abroad; but even more are now abroad in their own country. New York, of course, is the stronghold; but there are a handful of other American cities where they may find an exotic, and therefore artistic, atmosphere—San Francisco, New Orleans, Santa Fé.

In *The Folks* the daughter Margaret typifies the aesthete who breaks away from the sane, prosaic life of a Middle-Western small town and is infatuated with the "artily Spanish" Santa Fé and the decadence of Greenwich Village—in New York, where "the past didn't count any more". In Spengler's language (for Ruth Suckow's photograph of the great city gives a concrete illustration of the analysis in *The Hour of Decision*) Margaret "sinks to the bottom" and becomes a part of the aesthetic underworld of New York, hating "ethical, religious, national ideas, marriage for the sake of children, the family, state authority". The novelist makes it clear that Margaret is nothing in herself: she is as completely devoid of artistic genius as she is devoid of brains and of normal instincts. She is attracted by any cheap and "smarty" fashion that can be made to sound shocking:

Still, she wasn't going to be judged any more by Harry and Carl. They would be out of place among people who lived in New York and talked about music, and sex, and perversion. The wonderful Dr. Finkbein was interested—she could see it in the alertness of his eyes, and feel it in his body as he pressed close to her, breathing too near her face. Now it seemed that all the old values were overturned. . . . When she told them that she had been fired from the Normal, she achieved her greatest success. . . .

Now the gin was gone and they were all eating hot dogs and drinking coffee out of chipped Italian pottery cups. Jane embraced Margaret, and hid her head, wailing. There was Lossie's apartment! Daggie had the key. Lossie had left it with him when she got a chance to go abroad as secretary to that woman with the sandals and fillets who was going to revive the ancient arts of Greece.

In this passage New York is satirized from the point of view of the "hinterland"; in contrast to the literature of the 1920's which preferred to satirize the "hinterland" from the point of view of New York. This is one of the chief differences between the Middle-Western writers who dominated the twenties (Anderson, Lewis, Dreiser, Masters) and the regionalists who are leading one of the live literary movements of the thirties. *The Folks*, lacking in suspense and drama, is not very important for its story, but it is important for the attitude of the author and the promise that perhaps the Middle West is beginning to stand on its own feet, to forget the inferiority complex which has afflicted its creative work up to the present.

The new determination to develop the cultural wealth native to each different region of America has come late to the Middle West, having already established a foothold in the South, the Southwest, and Old New England. At the very turn of the decade, in 1930, a group of Southern regionalists issued a manifesto under the title *I'll Take My Stand*. Since that, the movement has developed an extremely interesting body of critical discussion — giving currency to a new interpretation of American society, creating, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, the sort of "stir and growth" out of which may "come the creative epochs of literature". One of the most significant developments in this growth was the acquisition of an organ of expression when the *Bookman* was changed to THE AMERICAN REVIEW in 1933 — particularly valuable because THE AMERICAN REVIEW is interested in cognate movements, such as Humanism and Distributism, which will tend to save regional-

ism from complacent provinciality and provide the needed cultural and economic accompaniment. The South has a number of regional periodicals of the very best type, but it was only a few months ago that the *Midwest* was founded in Chicago, protesting that this region, which has produced so many of the American novelists, poets, and critics for a generation, should abandon the self-deprecating attitude of a giant that fails to recognize his own strength. "Some day the Middle West will awaken to realize what a tradition lies behind it in American letters. And then it will stop letting New York steal its people to vitiate them with its stale culture, and exhaust them with its worn-out creeds." But the *Midwest* was weak just where **THE AMERICAN REVIEW** and the Southern periodical have been strong: it failed to relate regionalism to other profound intellectual currents of our decade that are flowing into America from Europe — but are flowing around New York, leaving "our greatest foreign city" in a sort of Cockney isolation, still mulling over the "worn-out creeds" of the twenties.

Though the Middle West still lacks its own periodical, it does have individuals who are doing important pioneering work. Paul Robert Beath, one of this group who is preparing an anthology of regional tales is a Middle-Westerner, and I know of no one who has phrased more neatly than he the difference between the regionalist and the Marxian views as to the immediate function of the artist in America. And in *The Folks* by another Middle-Westerner, we have the first popular success in the new regional literature of the Middle West. It gives us an unsurpassed picture of the people of Iowa (and of Middle-Westerners in Nev

York and California) painted with a superb selection of the details which suggest the genuine atmosphere. And if we have got beyond the fashions of the twenties, this does not mean that we have turned back to the older local-colour school, for the local-colour school gave us nothing like this study of the socially typical:

There was a dreadful wrench of loneliness in the onward-rushing noise of the train, in the rattle of the couplings, when at noon she went unsteadily through the Pullman coaches to the dining car. The coffee joggled in her cup, and not even the silver shine of the cover that the coloured waiter lifted with a cherishing flourish from her platter of sweetbreads could take away the solemn finality of the backward rush of country she was leaving. All the little towns they were passing made her think of home. . . . The train stopped, and she stared out at another brown-and-yellow depot, another town that—with its vacant lots across the tracks, and its asphalted street under shady trees leading to the business section past a dingy old frame house with a shingled tower—might just as well have been Belmond. . . . The country itself was shadowed over with the feeling that she could find no acceptance in it. It belonged to the folks and the folks' ideas . . . the great rolling country, where the rough stubble was getting brown in the fields, the autumn was drying the rich pastures.

But that is just the great defect of the novel. It does not show the folks' ideas. A sound regional literature would reveal what Middle-Westerners think; would recognize, for example, the political agrarianism that is continually springing up in the Middle West. Men, Ruth Suckow shows only in so far as their lives touch household affairs—and conse-

quently she leaves the impression that Middle-Western business men never talk about business or politics! Her folks do not read — but publishers' statistics show that they do read. In 1930 she recognized that "The colleges were not set apart from the life of the 'folks'. They were right in the centre of it". But in this book about the only thing we are told concerning Carl in college is that he was so good-natured as to wash dishes for his landlady! His reaction to the world's ideas, which no one can escape in college, does not seem to interest the author. Now contact with college graduates in Middle-Western towns will show that college has made a great deal of difference to them. A true picture of the Middle West would not fail to show the high value it places on the traditional culture of the Occident — a culture originated soon after Greece had been the Wild West, transmitted by Rome when she was on the marches of civilization, developed by France and England when they were just out of the period of conquering a new "West". To be on the western centre of the white man's civilization has always been an advantage. But this novel would leave us with a conception of a Middle West which could never have produced the Middle-Western universities, could never have produced the Middle-Western symphony orchestras or art galleries or contributions to science, or the "Globe Theatre" Elizabethan staging of Shakespeare. Some critics have hailed *The Folks* as a complete picture of the Middle West. This is not only absurd, it is condescending, insulting, and ignorant, with the impertinent ignorance that we are trying to get away from.

A book that told us everything about Iowans would

tell us everything about Herbert Hoover, Henry Wallace, and the School of Letters at the University of Iowa. What we are given is merely the same old picture used by the satirists of the twenties, with the satire removed — a photograph, real as far as it goes, but cut off across the top so that the men have no heads above the eyes. It still misses the inner reality which some future literary genius, looking with his own eyes, will see. What would we think of a picture of Scotland that left out the University of Edinburgh and failed to indicate the soil that grew Burns and Carlyle, or argued that Carlyle was being disloyal to his "folks" when he applied German thought to French history to point a moral for English "liberals"? His Scotch roots were perhaps deeper by the very height that he raised his head into the upper air, where the strong winds of his century were blowing — or rather the winds of the centuries, for Carlyle rose that high: he could see a "practical-devotional" monk of the twelfth century, and he could see the "New Spiritual Pythons, plenty of them", that America would have to fight; and he was none the less Scotch:

. . . Enormous Megatherions, as ugly as were ever born of mud, loom huge and hideous out of the twilight Future on America; and she will have her own agony, and her own victory, but on other terms than she is yet quite aware of.

When Carlyle was in London, his roots were still in Scotland. He needed a strong grip. When our Middle-Western authors, before Ruth Suckow, migrated to New York, they preferred to transplant their minds, and it is little wonder that their "intellectual" life failed to go high, as it failed to go deep.

With the horizon shut in, with no perspective, a reviewer in a New York "literary" journal even today is capable of referring to our nearest past, the Victorian Age, as "primaeval"! Depth, height, and vision go together, and I am not sure that all of our Regionalists realize this. One of the mud-ugliest Megatherions we have to fight today is the deadly lie that we can separate the life lived by European mankind, in any given region of the world, from the past experience of European mankind, without paying the penalty of reversion to barbarism. *The Folks* shows us a land without any gentlemen, and happily that is not a true picture of the Middle West. Indeed, if we accepted the picture as final, we would have to assume that the Middle West could never produce a Sandburg, a Rölvaag, or a Ruth Suckow.

If we accept this picture as final, the Middle West will cease to produce Sandburgs, Rölvaags, and Ruth Suckows, for "nature imitates art", and a people tends to model itself upon the picture of itself which is conventionally accepted as sound. It is poor pedagogy for a prophet to say to unformed people: "You are incapable of rising above material interests and empty conventions; you are predestined to hopeless triviality; you are congenital lowbrows". The flattering answer comes, "Yes, I suppose we are," followed only too soon by, "And we are proud of it; what are you doing here?" — and the arts have a new enemy. Doubtless many a barbarian was confirmed in his barbarism by contact with an Alexandrian aesthete, only to be converted to the rudiments of European culture when he was told that he had a valuable soul worth saving. And when, centuries

later, Hellenic culture, having lost its superciliousness, finally did reach the Northern peoples with the message that man is noble in reason and infinite in faculty, the results were encouraging. To the superficial sight of a Sinclair Lewis, what a ridiculous place Stratford-on-Avon would have been, infinitely more Philistine than Gopher Prairie, Middletown, Winesburg, or Belmond. And what conventional, dull, warm-hearted, narrow, awkward people Ruth Suckow would show us in portraying a shop-keeper's family devoted to wool-selling and social climbing. We might grant her that the Italianate Englishman, uprooted, is worse, and still wonder if we had the whole truth. Must we always have an opposition between "native" and "culture"? Might we not discover, even here in Stratford, something of a "native culture" not afraid to feed on ideas from distant lands and distant ages? Even in Belmond, Iowa, we suspect that there are some great books to read, and that someone reads them.

Or to take a closer parallel: Balzac in *Cousin Bette* says that the Slavic race "has spread like an inundation and now covers an immense portion of the earth's surface. It inhabits deserts where the free space is so vast that its peoples feel at their ease; it rubs shoulders with no other races (as the European nations do), and civilization is impossible without the constant friction of ideas and interests". We read that, and it sounds plausible, and we think immediately of the Middle-Western parallel, and we might be tempted to despair, had not Tolstoy shown us, from within, what provincial Slavic life is really like. After Tolstoy, it would be impossible to accept the neat and superficial generalization by the Parisian. But the Middle West has

had no Tolstoy, so that it is still possible to give too much credence to what Stevenson called "the spectral unreality of realistic books".

This is not breaking a butterfly upon a wheel. *The Folks* is anything but a butterfly; it is a massive work of more than seven hundred full pages. Moreover, the novel has been presented to us with claims that challenge the comparison we have made, and it has been hailed by reviewers, in their generous way, as doing considerably more than it does. But if we recognize the limitations of the novel, and the dangers it suggests which confront Middle-Western writers in this crucial period of our literature, we must admit that what Ruth Suckow has done she has done well. She has given us an unusually faithful record of social transition touching four generations. So far as the characters are concerned, she does the social transition a little too well; they tend to be types, studied from the outside, sociologically, the Inhibited Carl, the Rebel Margaret, the typical Iowa retired banker going to California, the Communist challenging the mores of the folks, the rootless Hollywood-bridge-expert type of man, whom the author unfortunately refers to, quite seriously, as masculine. (Her men, as I have pointed out, are not whole men.) But if it is an external, "scientific" study it is at least not a caricature. And her scenes live. They catch the group spirit, the feeling, the atmosphere, of the Middle-Western farms, churches, streets, homes, band concerts, schools — presented not as if they were static, but changing, as living organisms change, with the growth of the century. The novel takes us beyond the satire of the twenties, and it is a promise of solidier literature to come.